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ABSTRACT

For the future, college and university administrators face the problem of maintaining a satisfactory enrollment level. They recognize that reducing attrition may be a useful approach to their enrollment problems, but remedies for attrition are not readily developed. There is a consensus that campus administrators can use the available research to analyze their own attrition problems and develop strategies for alleviating them. These strategies can be successfully developed to retain those students who can, with counseling, benefit from a college program. College counselors should also advise students to dropout or transfer to other institutions when these alternatives may best serve their academic and personal needs. This counseling recognizes that dropping out is losing its negative connotation in many cases. (Author/LBH)

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RECENT TRENDS IN STUDENT RETENTION

Carol Hermstadt Shulman

American higher education's dropout rate is persistent, serious, and difficult to reduce. As measured by a student graduating in four years from his original college, the dropout rate has been about 40 percent nationally for the past 45 years (Cope and Hannah 1975). While transfer and returning students who eventually complete their degree programs reduce this attrition rate, there still remains a significant loss in investment of personal, institutional and governmental resources in higher education when students do not achieve their degree objectives.

With downward or stable enrollment trends forecast for the future,[1] the continuing problem of attrition has become a more pressing concern for educators because of its relationship to enrollment problems. Colleges face a decline in the number of potential freshmen and therefore need to retain those students already enrolled to maintain their financial stability and the breadth and strength of their academic programs. Students lost through attrition may not be readily replaced. There is, moreover, an ethical concern with fulfilling the promise of equal educational opportunity by coupling greater access with greater retention (Cross 1971; Spearman 1975).

As these conditions have made the need for a lower dropout rate more imperative, recent research on dropouts has appeared that may be helpful to better understand the nature of the dropout problem and to develop more successful campus-based retention programs.

DEFINING "DROPOUT"

A substantial amount of research on dropouts has been accumulated (e.g., Noel and Rentor 1975; Harvey 1970), but it is difficult to compare findings and to determine the extent of the dropout problem because the term "dropout" is so variously defined. In its strictest definition, from the institution's perspective, a dropout is a student who does not graduate in four years from the college in which he enrolled as a freshman. However, this definition is inadequate because it does not account for those students who complete their degree programs over a longer period of time either at their original institution or by transferring to other institutions (Astin 1972; El-Khawas and Bisconti 1974). Therefore, this narrow definition is not complete enough to allow educational policy planners to measure the final rate and ultimate cost of attrition.

Reacting to this definitional problem, Astin (1975) identifies dropouts in their relationship to those who persist in college or complete their degree programs. His approach recognizes that time factors and transfer students affect the real rate of attrition. His definitions are based on the results of a four-year longitudinal study of more than 100,000 students who entered college full time in 1968. At the time of the four-year follow-up, a "persister" is any student who meets one of three conditions: "(1) is enrolled full time in graduate or professional school; (2) has earned the B.A. (or higher) degree; or (3) has completed four years of college, is still enrolled full time, and is still pursuing at least a bachelor's degree" (Astin 1975, p. 9).

"Stopouts" constitute another part of the definition. A stopout is: any nonpersister who is still planning to obtain at least a bachelor's degree at the time of the four-year follow-up *and* who satisfies one of the following conditions: "(1) is enrolled full time as an undergraduate; (2) has completed four years of undergraduate work since 1968; or (3) has been continuously enrolled (full or part time) since 1968" (Astin 1975, p. 9). *Finally, a dropout is any student who at the time of the four-year follow-up does not fall into either the persister or stopout category* (Astin 1975, p. 10).

The validity of this approach to attrition analysis is supported by a survey of 1961 and 1966 full-time entering freshmen to determine, among other factors, their rate of degree completion over an extended period of time (El-Khawas and Bisconti 1974). The researchers surveyed both groups during 1971 and 1972, and their findings are based on weighted returns from 24,590 members of the 1961 group and 26,618 replies from the 1966 group. They found a substantially smaller dropout rate for the 1961 group than is usually reported: only 23.2 percent of 1961 entering freshmen had not received a bachelor's degree by 1971. For the 1966 group, the figure was 43.1 percent.

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[1] Leslie, Larry L. and Miller, Howard F., Jr. *Higher Education and the Steady State*. ERIC Research Report 4, Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1974. ED 091 965 MF-$0.96, HC-$3.61; *More Than Survival. Prospects for Higher Education in a Period of Uncertainty*. A Commentary with Recommendations by the Carnegie Foundation For the Advancement of Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975; *Projections of Educational Statistics to 1984-85*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 1976.

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ANALYZING THE ATTRITION PROBLEM

As the first step in reducing the rate of attrition, educators turn to studies that analyze the causes of dropping out. The most common method of examining the phenomenon has been to conduct statistical analyses employing a wide range of variables to develop a profile of the "dropout-prone" students (Harvey 1970). From these studies, educators have developed a laundry list of personal and academic characteristics shared by many dropouts. However, this profile of the dropout-prone student is not necessarily an accurate predictor of which students will persist to degree completion within four years and which will either dropout, stopout, or transfer.

Recognizing that this approach alone is inadequate, researchers are also interested in other systems of analysis, principally the method that considers the degree of "fit" or "congruence" between the profile of the student and that of the college that retains or loses him (Feldman and Newcomb 1969; Cope and Hannah 1975; Tinto 1975). A good fit, it is theorized, insures a greater rate of retention. A combination of methods is likely to be the most serviceable to administrators in the process of determining which kinds of students are likely to persist to degree completion in four years at their institution.

Of the statistical studies, Astin's (1975) is the most comprehensive available. Astin surveyed students in a representative national sample of 358 two- and four-year colleges in 1968. In his 1972 follow-up, Astin surveyed 101,000 students with a 175-item questionnaire on academic, personal, socioeconomic, and annual enrollment status factors.

The study reports on student perceptions of why they withdraw,[2] but it focuses primarily on discovering what factors, in the student's personal history and in his college career, affect his decision to withdraw or persist to degree completion. The magnitude of this study allows Astin to explore more closely the dimensions of single variables. He breaks down his major variables into their component parts and studies the impact of the subparts singly and in tandem. For example, the question of the role of financial aid in enhancing student persistence is broken down into financial aid received from personal savings, parental or family aid, repayable loan, and scholarship grant, or other gift (Astin 1975, p. 50). When he analyzed the data, Astin found that only some forms of financial aid have a positive influence on persistence. Thus, work-study programs enhance persistence; single sources of aid are more effective than most forms of financial aid packages; and reliance on loans has a negative effect on retention (Astin 1975, pp. 70-71).

Based on his accumulated empirical data, Astin develops specific recommendations for institutional and educational policy planners and students to reduce attrition. In one instance, evidence from several variables, such as financial aid and participation in extracurricular activities, indicate that persistence is related to the extent of the student's involvement in campus life. He therefore recommends that campus planners consider carefully their provisions for job opportunities on campus that promote attachment to the institution in order to improve retention (Astin 1975, p. 156).

In contrast to Astin's efforts to examine statistically the factors that increase the probability of attrition, Cope and Hannah (1975) promote the theory of "congruence," i.e. the belief that the extent to which the student fits in with the dominating social and academic values of the campus influences whether the student will continue, drop out, or seek other educational alternatives. In doing this, they focus on the "qualitative" aspects of the student's decision to withdraw, which involves an exploration of the student's attitudes and feelings toward his academic experience that led to his decision (Cope and Hannah 1975, p. 31).

Cope and Hannah support their theory of congruence with findings from their studies of college leaving. These studies contain information solicited from thirteen colleges from 1966-1969 on 1,256 students who did not return to their institution, an attrition questionnaire mailed to these students (60 percent usable return), and 153 interviews with students who indicated they would be unlikely to enroll in the following fall term. They do not construct a predictive profile of the student dropout from this data, but instead look at "qualitative reasons" for leaving. For example, the authors report that about 20 percent of student transfers to other institutions result from "a poor assessment of the social and intellectual climate" of the original institution (Cope and Hannah 1975, p. 33).

Further, Cope and Hannah note that dropouts are significantly different in personality from their classmates who do not leave. They report on Chickering's cross-institutional study of student leavers. The institutions in this study differ by type—three were church related, two were technical, and two were experimental liberal arts colleges—but Chickering found that dropouts from these colleges were:

> more impulsive, more responsive to their feelings and emotions [than those that continued]. They shared a more complex view of things. . . . They were more autonomous and less likely to give the socially desirable, expected answers designed to make a good impression (Cope and Hannah 1975, pp. 75-76).

It should be noted that these characteristics are not ranked equally across institutional categories but in relation to the prevailing personality profile at each type of institution.

TOOLS FOR CAMPUS-BASED RESEARCH

Research such as Astin's and Cope and Hannah's may provide theoretical bases and research methodologies for institutional planners seeking to reduce their own attrition rates, but institutional planners still need to conduct analyzes of their own student population to learn the particular causes of attrition that distinguish their campus. Factors that are significant on a national scale may not be relevant for a single campus, or may need to be weighted differently to meet the profile of a particular campus. Recognizing the need for campus-based research, several organizations have developed instruments for use by campus administrators.

- Bowers and Myers (1975) of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, have developed and tested a manual for conducting attrition studies. They suggest three reasons for carrying out such a study: "1. to provide information concerning dropouts which may lead the institution to corrective action; 2. to document the numbers and percentage of students who leave for reasons not amenable to corrective action; 3. to build models which will allow the prediction of which students will drop out and of the numbers of students who will drop out" (Bowers and Myers 1975, p. 3).
- Under the aegis of the Educational Testing Service, Warren and Roelfs (1972) have developed a questionnaire for junior college students that may be adapted to four-year baccalaureate students. The questionnaire is designed to elicit students' assessment of their college experience in a form that will be useful to faculty and administrators for improving the students' college

[2] Of those surveyed, 32 percent report "boredom with courses;" 28 percent cite financial difficulties; and 28 percent give "some other reason" for leaving (Astin 1975, p. 14).

experience. The areas explored in the questionnaire are: instruction; studying; faculty/staff contact; student goals and planning; registration and class scheduling; administrative regulations; student activities; financial problems; and daily living (Warren and Roelfs 1972, pp. 43-44).

- As part of the Council for the Advancement for Small Colleges' Research and Management Project, the Task Force on Attrition and Retention has developed a sample data collection instrument (Newby 1975) for administrators to use in measuring the extent of their attrition problem. The form has administrators calculate the attrition rate of freshmen through a four-year period, and distinguishes between students who persist from their freshman entrance into the school and students who transfer to the college. This instrument is currently being pilot-tested at CASC member institutions and the results will be analyzed during the final phase of the project (Newby 1975).

CAMPUS-BASED ACTIVITIES

At some colleges, retention programs are underway to foster retention, or to aid students in planning what they will do after they have withdrawn from the college. These programs may not be fully applicable to other campuses, but they provide interesting examples of how administrators have assimilated and used the resources on dropouts that are available to them.

In an example that typifies campus retention efforts, the American College Testing Program (1975) describes how a hypothetical college, "Midstate," explores the question of attrition and develops a retention program that meets its needs. For Midstate, a report of a 60 percent national dropout rate and a projection of declining enrollments underlined the need for the college to develop a retention program to maintain their enrollment levels. Other factors heightening its concern were the changing educational needs and career goals of students, the shifts from private to public institutions and from four- to two-year colleges, and the growth in part-time over full-time enrollment. After reviewing the research, the Committee recommended ten steps to enhance persistence, including programs such as the development of a student counseling/advising program from admissions through job placement; the establishment of a sensitive exit interview process; and the development of a training program for academic advisors (ACT 1975, p. 3.17).

Some institutions have focused their retention efforts on providing improved advisory services to students because inadequate counseling appears to increase the possibility of unnecessary withdrawals from an institution. Further, improved counseling efforts can give direction to the decisions of students who choose to leave (Cope and Hannah 1975, p. 57). In one such effort, Drake University (Iowa) organized a special counseling program directed toward "exit prone" freshmen, identified by their college entrance examination scores, high school class rank, and a questionnaire designed to identify potential dropouts. Each student in this group was assigned to a faculty advisor who received on-campus training in academic counseling. The advisor saw his students within the first five days of the term and once every two weeks thereafter. For this high-exit-prone group, the dropout rate was significantly less than that of the remainder of the freshman class *during* 1973-74. However, there was a 30 percent loss of all freshmen at the beginning of the sophomore year. The sponsors of the program believed the retention efforts worthwhile because the program prolonged the enrollment of the exit-prone students, thereby enhancing their later chances for degree completion, and it improved the return rate at the beginning of the sophomore year for the entire class (Drake University 1975). The advisory program ended in May 1975 because the special funding for it was discontinued.

In another approach, the University of Pittsburgh draws upon graduate students to counsel freshmen and sophomore students. These student-counselors, selected in a competitive process, are given stipends of about $500 per month plus tuition in return for 15 to 20 hours per week of advising a case load of 100 students. Each advisor is employed for three years, with some advisors added each year, so there is a constant supply of new and experienced counselors on the staff. The graduate students receive 90 hours of training before assuming their responsibilities. During that time they are instructed in advisory techniques and all aspects of campus life. Student evaluations of the advisors have been positive, but the university has not analyzed the effect of the advisory service on freshmen and sophomore attrition (Koloc 1976).

Unlike these counseling efforts, Spring Arbor College has developed a retention program that involves the entire campus community. Its "significant other" retention program is based upon the theory that the student's decision to stay or withdraw is critically affected by the attitudes of those who have great influence in his life ("significant others"). If these people are members of the college or external supportors then it is argued that the probability of retention is high (Husband 1976). To determine the probable rate of attrition, the college surveys its freshman class about six weeks into the fall term to discover which students have developed "significant others" who will positively influence their attitudes toward the college. The survey is about 75 percent accurate in predicting which students are likely to withdraw. These students receive special attention in the development of "significant others" on campus and participate in the college's efforts to involve its students in campus life through small interest groups such as field service teams, student admissions teams, and specialized club activities (Husband 1976).

In contrast to these personally-oriented efforts at retention, the Institute for Services to Education and several consortia of predominantly black colleges have designed a different freshmen and sophomore curriculum program for students they believe have a very high dropout potential in a traditional college program. (Their concern is also applicable to "new students" in higher education: those who score in "the lowest third among a national sample of young people on traditional tests of academic ability" [Cross 1971, p. 13]). The Thirteen College Curriculum Program (TCPP) was developed in 1967 for black college students who fall substantially below the national norms for the total college population when measured by the standard characteristics of socioeconomic status, and academic qualifications. However, these students are almost at the national norms for nonverbal abilities. From these findings, the TCCP's planners concluded that their students would have high dropout rates if they participated in traditional programs, but that their nonverbal abilities might enable them to benefit from experiential teaching approaches (Parmeter n.d.). They therefore designed the TCCP, a freshman and sophomore year program that is a separate unit in the participating college campus, which believes:

> Teaching begins with the premise that the only valid perspective on which learning can be based is that relatively unique perspective the learner brings with him to the classroom (Parmeter n.d., p. 4).

A longitudinal study of the program's efforts at retention shows that more than 60 percent of the TCCP students who entered in 1967 are approaching or have graduated from their institutions, compared with 45 percent of the regular college student. Further, an additional 10 percent of the TCCP students have transferred to other institutions at the end of their sophomore year (Humphries, Parmeter, and Turner 1972).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For the future, college and university administrators face the problem of maintaining a satisfactory enrollment level. Increasingly, they recognize that reducing attrition may be a useful approach to their enrollment problems. But remedies for attrition are not readily developed. Despite considerable study, researchers cannot say with confidence that they know how to predict which students will drop out and therefore should either not be admitted or should be offered special counseling (Astin 1975). However, there is a consensus that campus administrators can use the available research to analyze their own attrition problems and develop strategies for alleviating them. These strategies can be successfully developed to retain those students who can, with counseling, benefit from a college program. At the same time, college counselors should advise students to stopout or transfer to other institutions when these alternatives may best serve their academic and personal needs.

This counseling recognizes that increasingly "dropping out" is losing its negative connotations as students, parents, and educators recognize that leaving an institution may be a wiser step to take than simply "going along" the well-trodden path to degree completion. Staying at the wrong college may require ill-advised adaptations to the campus community (Tinto 1975; Cope and Hannah 1975). Cope and Hannah (1975) are particularly strong advocates of this view:

> there is little evidence that dropping out temporarily or permanently has much, if any, long-term negative effect on a person's sense of self-worth, career choice, or success in marriage. Moreover, there is a growing body of findings that suggest leaving college is a positive step taken by individuals to constructively reevaluate important decisions (p. 59).

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